NEWSWEEK
6 OCT 1969

P-Stalin, Svetlana
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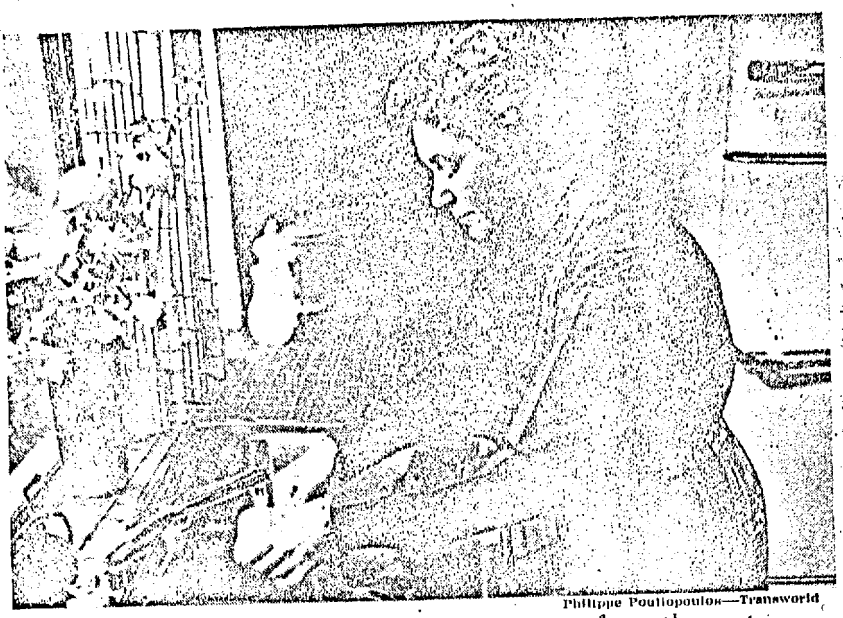
SOV 4.01.2 Only One Yoo

BOOKS



Phillipe Poulliopoulos—Transworld

Svetlana: A conscious attempt to get away from the past

Between Two Worlds

ONLY ONE YEAR. *By Svetlana Alliluyeva. Translated by Paul Chavchavadze. 444 pages. Harper & Row. $7.95.*

In her second book, the daughter of Stalin quotes a paternal warning from her friend George Kennan, the former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, who helped her get into the United States after her defection from Russia: "The shadow of your relationship to your father will always tend to follow you wherever you go." Certainly her father has followed her into this book, for he hangs like Banquo's ghost over many passages in this rambling volume of memoirs covering the one-year period after Svetlana's 1967 flight to the West.

In this book, hers is not quite the same conventional voice of "Twenty Letters to a Friend," her 1967 autobiography which Arthur Koestler described as having been written with "the voice of this nice, homely woman, treating us to nice, homely reflections." Here her voice is much more a voice aware of her role as the daughter of one of the most notorious despots in history. It is also, at times, the voice of a woman crying desperately for some decent measure of freedom, for some release from that past that insists she still is—and will always be—the daughter of Stalin.

Cronies: For life with father was not an experience easily washed from her psyche. "Just to enumerate to oneself the names of all the party members annihilated by my father on his way to power," she writes, "was enough to make one go mad." But while some of her accounts seem taken from the pages of Dostoevski's "The Possessed," other recollections have a comic pathos that evokes Hannah Arendt's contention about the essential banality of evil. For example, her father, she relates, threw frequent dinner parties at which his closest cronies would gather to entertain one another with "coarse peasant jokes and coarse peasant stories," to slip tomatoes onto one another's chairs for kicks and, invariably, to drink enough vodka to sink the Kremlin. "The 'Chief,' more often than not," she writes, "would be carried home dead drunk, after having lain for some time in a bathroom, vomiting. Beria [the chief of the secret police], too, would often go home in this condition, although no one ever dared slide a tomato under him."

In brooding about her father, Svetlana tries to explain as best she can a man whose behavior many historians seem to ascribe to pure madness. Svetlana is not so sure. "His mania was no sick fancy," she writes. "He knew that he was hated, and he knew why . . . My father was far too cold-blooded a man for fits of temporary insanity or Othello-like passions." In fact, she regards her father as a not-so-unique product of the dismal history of civilization in general and of the Soviet political system in particular. "He was his own 'victim'—victim of that terrible thirst for power with which tyrants are born. It burned him from within, driving him all his life toward a false, tragic dead end, down the long road on which everything had been destroyed by him. In the end he attained an inner emptiness, which he did not wish to reveal either to himself or to others. And in this lay his end."

Svetlana believes that by leaving Russia she took a giant step toward her "own process of liberation" and that her life so far in the United States has been a conscious attempt "to get away from my past." In fact, Svetlana has avoided the luncheons and lectures at which she would have been expected to inveigh against the evils of Communism. Her friends at Princeton, where she owns a house on a shady, suburban street only a short distance from the university, have helped insulate her from newsmen and other reminders of her former life. For clearly Svetlana is having trouble coming to terms not just with a past as characterized by the father she abandoned (he is, after all, dead), but with a past as carried into the future by the children she left behind in Moscow. "It's they alone who draw me back," she admits.

Burden: Indeed, at Princeton, Svetlana suggests, the struggle to deal with the twin facts of her life—that she hated her father and abandoned her two children—has left her little energy with which to play the role of the most celebrated defector in history. "I suddenly felt I didn't have the strength to live up to what I myself had done. I was incapable of responding to all those calls and accolades. I was too weak for such a role. I had taken upon myself something that was too heavy a burden for my weak shoulders, something that in the end would crush me. It was as if I had stepped out on a stage in front of a huge audience in an immense opera-theater and found that I had no voice to sing with." By the end of this book, then, her voice is not that of a certain trumpet flourishing the rhetoric of the "free world." It is, in fact, the voice of a highly intelligent woman who, at least in these pages, seems for the moment lost between two worlds.

—THOMAS GORDON PLATE